



Bird's-eye view of New Jersey's political hub—Trenton. Domed State Capitol and State House Annex appear in center foreground with the War Memorial Building in right center. The avenue at left is State street.

(Staff Photo by Jack Johnston from Mellor-Howard Plane)

CAVALCADE OF COUNTIES: **Seat of Government**



The Princeton Battle Monument by Frederick W. MacMonnies. One of the figures depicts Gen. Hugh Mercer, for whom the county is named.

LONG before Mercer County's official birthdate in 1838 the old girl had a past and a pedigree upwards of 150 years long. Her forebears came from the finest families; prestige and culture and heroics lodged firmly in her background. The wonder was not that Mercer finally was born, but rather that her delivery took so long.

Little bliss accompanied Mercer's actual birth, mainly because it occurred in the "smoke-filled" atmosphere so typical of state capitals. Burlington, Middlesex and Hunterdon counties, on the one hand, and Somerset, on the other, fostered Mercer. Somerset and Middlesex, given assurances of the inviolability of its own territory, joined the majority of the Legislature in severing parts of Burlington, Middlesex and Hunterdon on February 22, 1838, to form Mercer.

Five days later Burlington, Middlesex and Hunterdon, with understandable relish, indorsed a second legislative act—this time cutting off a bit of Somerset to be joined to the brand-new infant called Mercer County. Thus, with extended labor pains and

two birthdays, was Mercer born. It should have been easier and more natural.

The region surrounding the state capital had long been unnaturally divided. Residents on the north side of Assumpink Creek (which cuts through the heart of Trenton) went to Flemington for county business, residents on the south side of the creek had to travel to Mount Holly for their county affairs. Princeton had it even worse; Somerset and Middlesex counties split along Main street. Folks on the north side traveled 18 miles to Somerville to the county seat while their Middlesex County neighbors across the way had to go 20 miles to New Brunswick to their court house.

MOREOVER, no section of the state had a more homogeneous past. No county had more reason for being.

Take, for instance, the colonial heritage. The first settlers had much in common, coming either from old Burlington or across-state from Long Island. Mahlon Stacy gets credit for being the first arrival of record; as

This is the eleventh of a series of articles dealing with New Jersey's 21 counties, sketching their past and present with, now and then, a peek into their future. The counties will be considered in alphabetical order each week. Next Sunday: Middlesex County.



Mercer County, Noted for its Educational and Industrial Assets, Has Noble Colonial Heritage

BY JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

early as 1680 he established a mill at the Falls of the Delaware—one of the state's first mills. Within 20 years most of the region had been settled, with Quaker families taking up residence on the banks of Stony Brook at Princeton and Long Island emigrants putting down roots near Hopewell and Maidenhead (Lawrenceville).

Col. William Trent bought an 800-acre farm from Mahlon Stacy in 1714, built a home in 1719 and by giving land induced the county government to stay permanently in town in 1720. Grateful villagers called the settlement "Trent's Town" (although many grumbled that "Stacy's Town" would have been more appropriate).

Unquestionably, however, a decision by the College of New Jersey board of trustees to move their young college out of Newark in 1754 had more to do with Mercer's early growth than roads or streams or emigrants.

The trustees first approached New Brunswick. "Look," they bargained, "you people can have the college if you'll raise 1,000 pounds and give us 10 acres of land in town and 200 acres of woodland within three miles of town."

NEW BRUNSWICK residents pondered the bargain, but Princeton residents quickly stepped forward with an offer to meet the terms. Immediately work started on a college building and

by 1756 the imposing three-story Nassau Hall was ready. Called "the largest stone building in all the colonies," Old Nassau's 60 rooms had a capacity of 147 students (although the college had only 70 students when it transferred from Newark in 1756).

The arrival of the college naturally intensified cultural feelings throughout the region. Six miles away in Hopewell Rev. Isaac Eaton opened his Baptist Academy the same year the college came to Princeton. Rev. Eaton's academy is the acknowledged birthplace of Brown University, since its first pupil, James Manning of Piscataway founded Brown University and became its first president in 1764.

Possibly even more vital to the future of the region and of the nation, the College of New Jersey became the center of intense anti-British feeling—particularly after fiery Rev. John Witherspoon arrived from Scotland in 1768 to head the college. Students in 1774 burned tea on the campus after word came of the Boston Tea Party. Rev. Witherspoon and Richard Stockton became outspoken in support of revolution and their voices found an echo in Hopewell, where John Hart bitterly denounced the British.

Small wonder, then, that Rev. Witherspoon, Stockton and Hart became three of New Jersey's five signers of the Declaration of Independence (Francis Hopkinson of Bordentown and

Delaware River span, linking Trenton and Morrisville, with slogan calling attention to diversity of Trenton's products and extent of its markets.

RIGHT: Trenton Battle Monument, a 155-foot tower, was erected in 1893 on spot where Washington's artillery opened fire on the Hessians after crossing the ice-choked Delaware.

LEFT: Princeton's colonial character is reflected in buildings surrounding Palmer Square, a one-time slum area cleared at a cost of \$4,500,000.

Abraham Clark of Roselle being the others). Small wonder that the state's first Legislature held its first session in Nassau Hall in August, 1776, or that Jersey's first Governor, William Livingston, took his inaugural oath in Princeton.

THE fires of revolution flickered low early in December, 1776, when Gen. Washington's sadly disorganized army limped through Mercer County and disconsolately crossed the Delaware to Pennsylvania. British and Hessian troops swarmed over Princeton, Trenton, Hopewell and Lawrenceville, showing scorn for the ragged revolutionists and displaying an eagerness to punish the area for its rebellious leadership. Outspoken John Hart fled from his home in Hopewell and hid in the Sourland Mountains. The State Legislature fled to Haddonfield and The College of New Jersey suspended classes.

But even as the gloom deepened, Washington plotted the boldest stroke of the Revolution. Finally, on Christmas night, 1776, scouts brought word from Trenton that the Hessians were deep in their wassail cups. The Continental Army moved across the ice-choked river to McKonkey's Ferry, eight miles north of Trenton. Nine hours passed in the crossing before 2,400 men gathered about Washington on the New Jersey side to hear him order: "On to Trenton!"

Meanwhile, the Hessians dozed drunkenly in Trenton, completely unable to believe word brought at 8 A. M. that the Continentals had pierced the city's outskirts. Minutes later Washington's army smashed them, killing

or wounding 106 Hessians and capturing 23 officers and 886 enlisted men. Up the river road raced Washington's victorious army, headed back across the menacing Delaware to Pennsylvania.

A week later the Colonial troops recrossed the Delaware, this time walking over on the ice. They dug in on the south side of Assunpink Creek to face the now-furious enemy. Three times on January 2, 1777, the British attacked the bridge over the creek, three times they fell back. As darkness fell, Lord Cornwallis called off his men with the offhand comment that "we'll bag the fox in the morning."

Next morning the fox was gone, leaving behind brightly burning campfires and a few wooden cannon to confound the British. The startled Cornwallis heard musket fire far off in the distance near Princeton, but before he could move his cumbersome army into action the fox had swept on. Nassau Hall changed hands three times in bloody battling, with the British finally retaining the hall as Washington withdrew his forces and headed up the Millstone Valley for Winter headquarters at Morristown. Behind in Princeton lay 30 dead or wounded Americans, including Gen. Hugh Mercer, for whom the county is named.

FITTINGLY enough, Princeton served as the capital of the infant nation from June 26 to November 4, 1783, when the Continental Congress convened in Nassau Hall. There news was received of the signing of the peace treaty, there Washington received the thanks of the nation. Nearby, at Rocky Hill,

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MERCER COUNTY

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the general wrote and delivered his memorable farewell address.

Strong sentiment favored Trenton as the permanent capital of the United States in 1784 and a three-man commission actually met to fix a spot "not more than six miles from Trenton." New England favored Trenton, the South favored a location at Georgetown on the Potomac River. Washington expressed disapproval of the Trenton location in February, 1785, and the heartened opposition swung the capital to the Potomac. Nevertheless, yellow fever epidemics in Philadelphia three times drove Federal departments to Trenton in the 1790s, and in 1799 President John Adams and his wife lived temporarily in the town.

Trenton's reverence of Washington continued, of course, despite his disapproval of the place for a national capital. As he passed through town on April 21, 1789, on his way to New York to accept the Presidency, white-robed "virgin's fair and matron's grave" (they so described themselves in song) greeted him at Assunpink Creek beneath a flower-festooned arch which proclaimed in gilt letters: "THE DEFENDER OF THE MOTHERS WILL BE THE PROTECTOR OF THE DAUGHTERS."

THE following year the State Legislature fixed the New Jersey capital in Trenton. Work started on the first quaint State House in 1791 (and parts of the original building are said to still exist somewhere in the vastly enlarged and altered State House of today).

Trenton was little more than a village in 1791, with a town pump, a pillory and a whipping post on its streets. Its location astride the New York-Philadelphia stage route aided its growth, and completion in 1806 of a 1,100-foot wooden covered bridge over the Delaware sped travelers on to Philadelphia. Life for the traveler centered at Princeton's Nassau Hotel, where from 1812 to 1836 inn-keeper John Joline had more than 100 horses standing in the immense stables to serve the 30 stages which each day started from the hotel. Inside the old pre-Revolutionary inn college students downed their grog and carved their initials on the rough furniture.

College students became exceedingly troublesome in Princeton from 1800 to 1820. The burning of Nassau Hall in 1802 was believed to be the work of arsonists. Students rebelled during the "reign of terror" under College President Dr. Samuel Stan-

hope Smith, who insisted (among other rules) that students remove their caps and stand silently when within 100 feet of the president or within 50 feet of any faculty member.

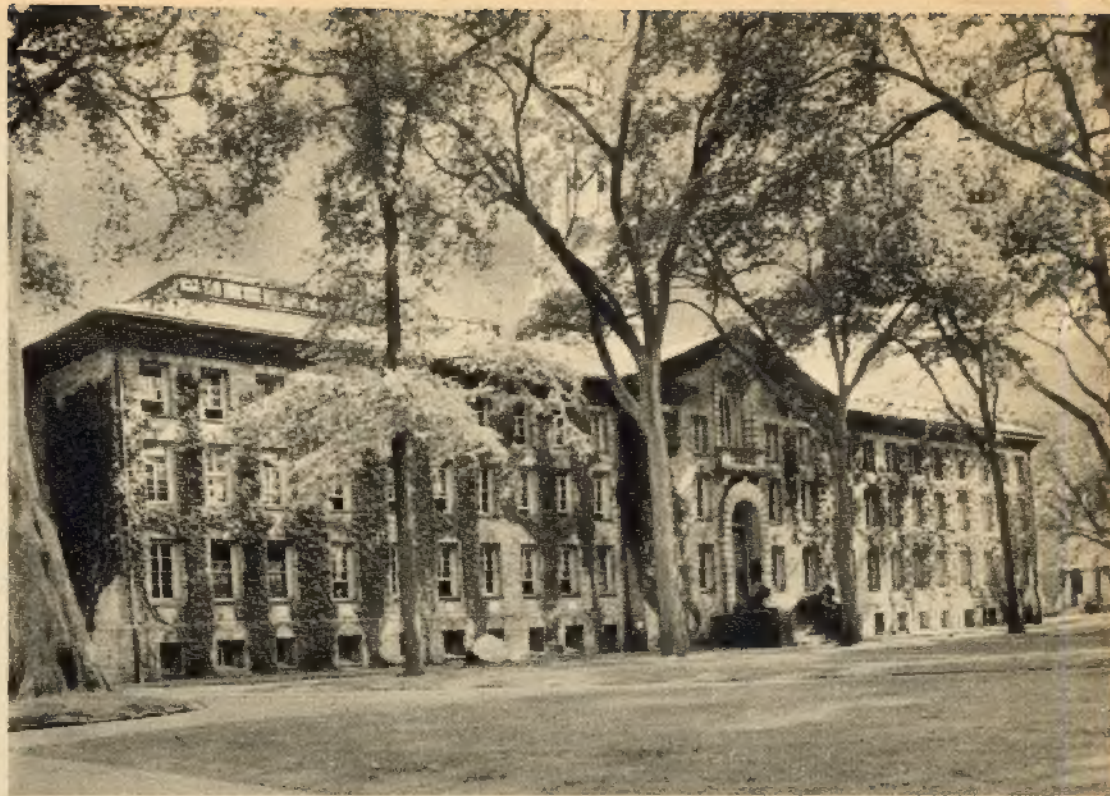
The campus flared into action. More than 125 students were expelled in 1806. Dr. Smith's successor, Rev. Ashbel Green, proved even more tyrannical. Early on a January morning in 1817 students locked up the entire faculty and set fire to outbuildings, then held Old North Hall for a full day with cutlasses and pistols before the rebellion died. Only 21 students were graduated that year.

DEVELOPMENT of water power by the Delaware Falls company, digging of the Delaware & Raritan Canal and construction of the Camden & Amboy Railroad in the 1830s hastened Trenton's change from a charming colonial village to a busy metropolis. Only 20,000 people lived in all of Mercer County on its creation in 1838, but the city on the Falls of the Delaware had 4,000 inhabitants and was on the eve of an industrial spurt which blossomed at Civil War time and came into full flower in the 1880s.

The canal and the C. & A. Railroad shaped the course of all Mercer. Possibly most important, canal and railroad both carefully kept out of the center of Princeton, thus preserving the college town's exclusive residential character. Until 1840 the railroad ran through the southern part of the county, via Yardville and Hightstown, which meant Trenton-bound passengers had to transfer to stages at Yardville. Hightstown, long a prosperous agricultural center, tripled in size within a decade after the coming of the Camden & Amboy—then settled back to the quiet life about its towering Baptist Church steeple after the main line switched northward to include Trenton.

Mercer County played an important role in the Civil War. Its industries helped feed the Union war machine, its troops responded early to pleas for manpower. The College of New Jersey (by then generally known as Princeton College) faced another problem. Princeton had long been favored by Southern plantation owners as the place to educate their sons. Accordingly, the war split the campus and when the college closed for Summer recess in 1861 half the student body of 300 went home to the South, never to return.

The county's character was fixed by 1870. State officialdom kept the capi-



Princeton's Nassau Hall today and in 1856 (below). When completed in 1756 it was known as the "largest stone building in the Colonies."



tal city in constant turmoil—particularly through 40 years of strife when the Camden & Amboy Railroad held unbridled sway in the State House. Trenton's industry formed a sharp contrast with the extensive oat fields in nearby Ewing Township, the broad farms near the Sourland Mountains and the fertile fields surrounding Hightstown.

Princeton continued to exert profound influence. The educational atmosphere reached out to surrounding communities and encouraged preparatory schools, such as Lawrenceville Classical and Commercial High School, founded 1810; Pennington Seminary, founded 1839, and Hightstown's Peddie Institute, founded 1869.

Post-Civil War days brought Southern sons back to the Princeton campus and also brought the much-loved Dr. James McCosh, who started a 20-year term as college president in 1868.

Before he stepped down he had introduced a system of elective studies—which upset the rigid theory of church-sponsored education and moved Princeton toward campus liberality and university status.

One of the students under Dr. McCosh was young "Tommy" Wilson, Class of 1879, who returned in 1890 as Professor T. Woodrow Wilson and became university president in 1902. Wilson's campus presidency found him fighting three bitter fights. He won only one—the battle to get the preceptor system at Princeton.

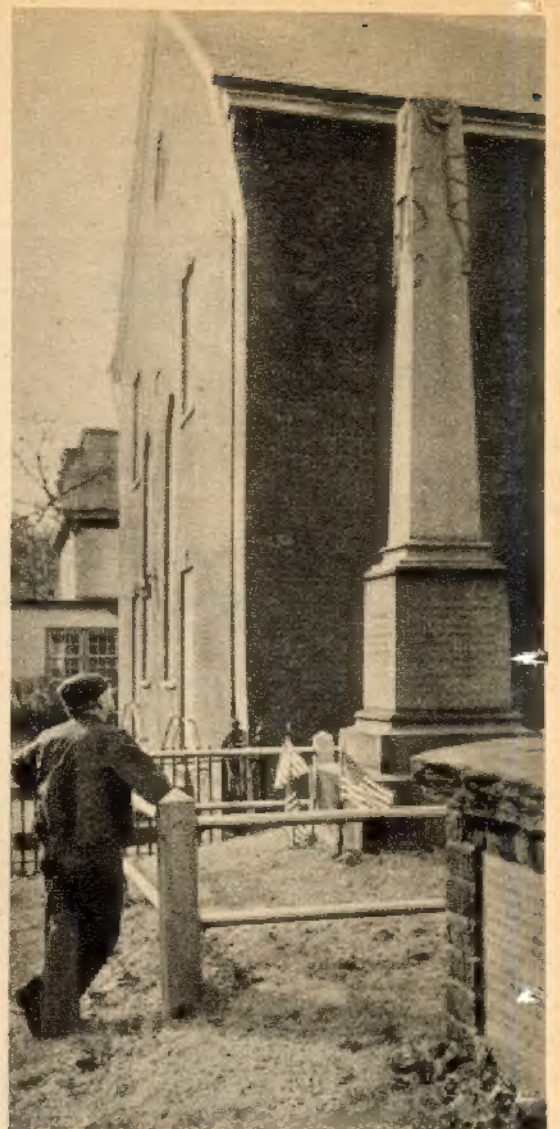
He lost in an attempt to rid the campus of its exclusive eating societies and lost a fight to have the graduate school as an integral part of the university. His campus losses had much to do with his entry into politics. He became Governor of New Jersey in 1911, President of the United States in 1913—and in his second term as



McKonkey's Ferry House at Washington Crossing State Park where the leader of the Independence forces rested on Christmas night of 1776.



Trent House at 539 South Warren street, built in 1719 by Col. William Trent, founder of the settlement then known as "Trent's Town."



Monument to John Hart, one of New Jersey's five signers of the Declaration of Independence, in the cemetery of Old Baptist Church at Hopewell.

LEFT: Mercer County, with area totaling 227 square miles, was originally formed from parts of Burlington, Somerset, Hunterdon and Middlesex counties.

President suffered a crushing rejection of his dreams for a postwar League of Nations.

WHILE Princeton progressed, industry boomed in Trenton. A Trenton editor wrote in 1882:

"* * * The city has, indeed, been fairly transformed in 20 years from a sleepy, old-fashioned town into a live, wide-awake and growing city * * *"

He correctly credited iron, steel, rubber, pottery and wire rope for the transformation. Trenton potteries, started in the 18th Century, got into full swing between 1850 and 1870. Dozens of potteries operated in Trenton by 1880, making products ranging from white granite ware to the finest china. From Trenton potteries came, in 1873, the first porcelain sanitary ware in the United States. Trenton potters boastfully called their city the "Staffordshire of America."

Walter Scott Lenox, who learned the industry as an apprentice in a Trenton pottery, resolved in the 1880s to perfect American dinnerware. His efforts led to the creamy, richly lustrous ware known throughout the world as Lenox china. Stricken blind and paralyzed in 1895, with his dream about to be realized, Lenox lived to know that Woodrow Wilson bought 1,700 pieces of Lenox for the White House (where Lenox has been the official dinnerware ever since).

Extensive iron works started in Trenton in the 1840s included the Trenton Iron Works of Peter Cooper and Ambram S. Hewitt. By 1885 the Cooper-Hewitt plant covered 11 acres and all of Trenton's several iron industries employed 3,000 men and produced a volume exceeding \$5,000,000 in value.

Cooper and Hewitt helped bring Trenton its most important industry,

the Roebling wire rope company. John A. Roebling, founder of the firm and foremost exponent of the use of wire rope in suspension bridges, transferred his plant to Trenton in 1849. Roebling built the suspension bridge over Niagara in the early 1850s but received fatal injuries in July, 1869, while inspecting the site of the Brooklyn Bridge. The Roebling sons completed the Brooklyn Bridge, put the company on the solid footing which saw it become internationally famed (for the George Washington and Golden Gate bridges, among many things).

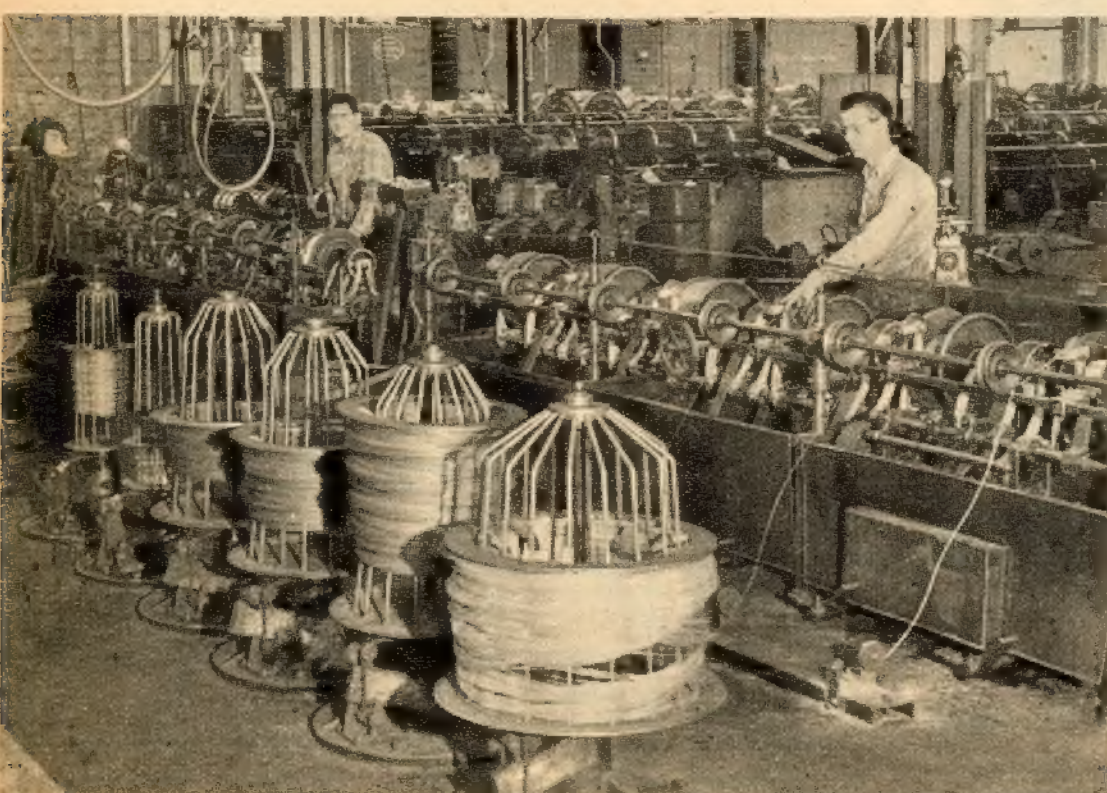
INDUSTRY naturally pushed residential areas outward, to the western part of Trenton and to Ewing Township and Pennington. Col. John Kunkel of New York started to develop pasture land in Pennington in 1894 and William P. Howe Sr. developed nearby fields after 1910. Pennington's muddy streets didn't help much (in 1908 Mayor William Radcliffe had to ask the council to set aside "one place where ladies can get on and off trolley cars without wearing boots"). However, a Board of Trade started to "boost Pennington" in 1911—and convinced itself Pennington was THE place to live (and when town officials paved the streets the Board of Trade found itself a prophet).

Princeton's shady streets and handsome estates began to attract wealthy retired men in the 1890s (including ex-President Grover Cleveland). Its spreading estates have thus been carefully preserved. In more recent years noted scholars have come to Princeton and environs for widely varied research and cultural activities—some closely linked to the university, some independent. These include the Westminster Choir School, the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, the Institute for Advanced Study, the James Forrestal Research Center and many other schools and research centers.

Naturally State House activity has ever been vital in Mercer County, yet it has always seemed superimposed rather than an integral part of the county. That stems largely from two reasons—because legislative sessions are held in the evenings and because rapid transportation facilities in and out of Trenton speed legislators homeward after the session. Trenton, accordingly, has not become the social center of the state in the manner of most state capitals. Indeed, there is good cause to doubt that it is even the political fulcrum of New Jersey—since decisions made (or taken apart) in State House caucus usually stem from instructions carried by legislators from their local constituency.

AS a matter of fact, Mercer is important in its own right. No Jersey county has a more noble Colonial heritage (and it's unlikely that any area in the colonies played a more vital part in winning independence). Its educational assets are nationally known. Trenton's industry justifies the claim that "Trenton Makes—the World Takes" because of the diversity and extent of its more than 300 manufacturing plants. Mercer's population has spurted 150 per cent since 1900 (95,300 to 230,000), yet, surprisingly, Mercer stands eighth in the state in value of agricultural products—because of the extensive potato fields and dairy farms surrounding Hightstown and the dairy farms north and west of Princeton.

Obviously, most of Mercer County's personality existed long before its 1838 birthdays. The proof of Mercer's right to county status has been found in the easy way parts of four counties have fitted together in the 114 years since. On the basis of Revolutionary War history alone, the county's components belong with one another. To repeat: The wonder is not that Mercer was born, but rather that delivery took so long.



Wire in coil form is wound on spools of varying dimensions at the Trenton plant of John A. Roebling's Sons Company, bridge builders.